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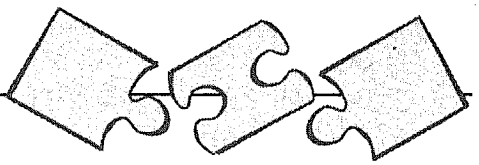
# Introduction



## What is grammar?

Grammar is a way of describing how a language works to make meaning within a particular culture.

## Why learn about grammar?

- to be able to reflect on how the English language works
- to have a shared language for talking about the main features of the English language
- to understand how grammatical structures create different kinds of meaning
- to examine patterns of language and word choices to critically analyse texts
- to be able to use language effectively, appropriately and accurately.

## Assumptions

The approach to grammar adopted in this book is based on the following assumptions:

- Language is a dynamic, complex system of resources for making meaning. Students should be encouraged to explore it as a fascinating phenomenon which is central to their lives.
- Language reflects the culture in which it is used. It is not a neutral medium, but expresses certain world-views, values, beliefs and attitudes.
- Language changes from situation to situation, depending on the social purpose for which it is being used, the subject matter, who is involved, and whether the language is spoken or written.
- The emphasis in language study is on how people use authentic language in various contexts in real life to achieve their purposes. The particular focus will be on the language needed for successful participation in school contexts.
- A knowledge of grammar can help us to critically evaluate our own texts and those of others (eg identifying point of view; examining how language can be manipulated to achieve certain effects and position the reader in a particular way; knowing how language can be used to construct a particular identity or a particular way of viewing the world).

- The approach to grammar should not have the effect of excluding or marginalising students who speak a social dialect which is different from Standard Australian English. Different varieties of English are to be respected and maintained, while extending the students' ability to use appropriate registers in specific situations (eg written texts in school and workplace contexts).

## A multi-purpose grammar

The description of grammar provided here has been designed so that teachers can use it for a number of different purposes: for understanding the structure or formation of various language features; for anticipating where students might need particular assistance with certain features; and for exploring how language functions to create different types of meaning. Throughout the book, these different purposes have been signalled by the use of visual cues—the symbols and screen discussed on the following pages.

### *Looking at meaning*

While knowledge about the structure of language can be informative and useful, these days it is not generally seen as an end in itself. In this book, we look at how the different grammatical categories are involved in the construction of meaning:

- what jobs do adverbials do? what happens if I leave them out?
- how can my choice of nouns affect the meaning of the text?
- how can I use certain types of adjectives to express my opinion about something?
- which grammatical categories are involved in skills such as classifying, defining, describing, categorising, exemplifying?
- which linguistic features can help me form a text which is coherent and cohesive?
- how do the grammatical patterns change from text to text? why? with what effect?
- how do the grammatical choices in literary texts differ from factual texts?
- how does the context affect the sort of grammatical choices made?

Here we are viewing grammar as a resource—an array of possibilities from which we can choose. Learning grammar in this sense is seen as extending a learner's potential to make and produce meanings. A functional approach to language is concerned with the language choices available to construct different kinds of meanings and how these choices vary according to the social context.

### *Formation*

A traditional motive for teaching about grammar has been the development of an analytical approach to language—an ability to 'reason grammatically', and a metalinguistic awareness. Being able to identify and name different grammatical categories provides students with a language for talking about language. Knowing how language is structured helps us to deal with questions such as:

- how are prefixes and suffixes used to create words?
- what does a noun group contain?
- how are different verb tenses formed?
- what does a clause look like?
- how are messages combined to form sentences?

Once students are conscious of how different linguistic structures are formed, they are in a better position to be able to manipulate these structures to create clear, well-structured, unambiguous sentences. And in their reading, they are better able to perceive meaningful 'chunks' of language rather than to read each word as a discrete unit.

*Troubleshooting*

*There are certain linguistic structures which often cause problems for young students. In many cases, the problems will sort themselves out over time. Often, however, it is useful for the teacher to be able to identify trouble spots so that the problem can be explained or so that activities can be designed to address the difficulty.*

*It is this area which many people associate with the learning of grammar: the correction of 'mistakes'. This is a legitimate area of concern. Students' language is often judged by their control over certain linguistic features, and this can be a significant factor in examinations, job applications, and so on. It is important, however, not to let this get out of perspective. There are probably only a dozen or so "problem structures" which regularly crop up in children's writing.*

## Bridging approaches

In a truly functional grammar, you would need to have two layers of terminology: one to describe the grammatical category and one to describe the different functions which the grammatical category can perform. This is important, as each grammatical category can do a variety of jobs. There is no one-to-one correspondence between form and function. A noun, for example, can represent a participant in an action, or it can express a particular viewpoint, or it can act as the theme of a sentence, or it can help to make links within a text.

In Collerson's grammar, the starting point was function and meaning, with less emphasis on the grammatical categories used to realise the meanings. In this book the starting point is the grammatical categories, working towards the different kinds of meanings which they can make.

Ideally, students should be familiar both with terms which refer to form (eg noun, verb) and terms which refer to their functions (eg participant, process). At this stage, however, it is seen as a useful interim strategy to draw on teachers' current knowledge about grammar and extend that to include a functional perspective. This has been done here by using conventional terminology where possible (eg 'verb'), by incorporating functional aspects through the use of terms such as 'action verb', 'saying verb', 'thinking verb', and by using functional terms where there is no equivalent in more traditional grammars (eg 'theme', 'cohesive link').

### A functional perspective

A functional approach looks at how language enables us to do things in our daily lives. To participate successfully in school and the community, for example, students need to know how to use language:

- for achieving different social purposes
- for interacting with others
- for developing understandings about the world
- and for moving from 'more spoken' to 'more written' forms

### Achieving different social purposes

As they progress through school and life, learners need to be able to use language in order to achieve a range of social purposes: describing, classifying, explaining, arguing, recounting, and so on. In the early years of schooling, children are able to use language in achieving these purposes in an elementary way, generally in the oral or visual mode. Different social purposes are expressed through different text-types. Children operate with a moderate range of text types which generally have a relatively basic, unelaborated structure (eg recounts involving a single event, arguments that are unsupported by evidence, explanations of only a sentence or two in length). With teacher guidance over the years, students should be able to confidently interpret and employ a wide range of text types for a variety of social purposes, including texts which have a more complex, unpredictable structure. This provides students with a solid preparation for the demands of secondary school and life in the community.

While not dealing in detail with different genres or text types, this book will refer to how different grammatical resources are drawn on in achieving different social purposes.

### Interacting with others

One of the major functions of language is to enable interaction. Through language we construct particular roles and relationships. Students need to be able to use language effectively to interact with a range of people. In the early years, they will use language in more informal, familiar ways with known peers and adults. As they grow older, they will need to be able to use language which is more impersonal and formal (particularly in the written mode). When they first come to school they use language which is relatively unguarded, freely expressing their opinions and attitudes. Gradually they will also need to learn ways of expressing themselves that are a bit more detached, with a more subtle use of evaluative language and modality.

In school, children need the skills of group interaction, the ability to take part in class discussions, the poise to talk with both familiar and unfamiliar adults. They need to know how to cope in situations with different levels of authority and power (eg in terms of expertise, age, gender, ethnicity). They need to know how to take on an expanding range of roles: group leader, observer, apprentice, mediator, initiator, questioner, co-learner. They need to be able to evaluate their own interaction skills and to reflect critically on the ways in which others use language to interact with them in oral and written language (eg are they being persuaded to accept a particular point of view? how is language being used to do this? how might they recognise this and resist if necessary?). In many cases, children will need explicit assistance in developing these interpersonal skills.

This book will provide examples of how different grammatical categories are involved when making statements, asking questions, giving commands, expressing opinions, making judgements, and so on. This is called the interpersonal function of language.

### Representing experience

Another major function of language is to represent the world, to help us to express and understand our experiences. In the school context, this involves using and understanding the language of the different areas of the curriculum. It is now well-known that each subject has its own way of using language to develop knowledge and understandings relevant to that area. The language of science, for example, is quite different from the language of history. The language used in English literary texts is quite different from that of mathematics texts. Students need to be able to read and write texts which become increasingly technical and subject-specific as they move through the school system from primary to high school.

On entering school, students' language will be concerned with more particular, everyday understandings ('my family', 'our neighbourhood'). As they grow older, they need to be able to talk and write in more generalised terms ('families', 'dinosaurs') about less familiar topics which often require research ('the planets', 'volcano eruptions') and specialist terminology ('solar system', 'lava'). It cannot be taken for granted that this type of language will develop automatically.

This book will include examples of how grammar functions to represent our experience of the world: the kinds of activities taking place, the participants in those activities, the circumstances surrounding those activities, and the relationship between ideas.

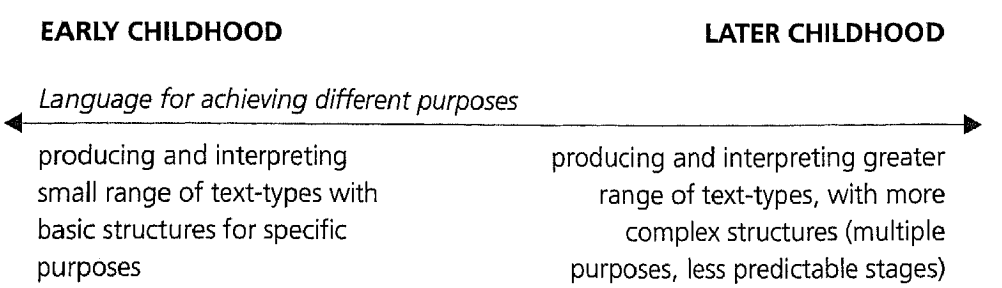
### Creating oral and written texts

One of the major shifts in children's language use over the primary years is from the spoken mode to the written mode. When students enter school, they are accustomed to using language in face-to-face oral interaction. It is spontaneous and immediate. It generally refers to the 'here-and-now', to the surrounding context. There is an interaction partner who can provide support by asking questions, giving feedback, requesting clarification. When moving to the written mode, students need to learn how to use language in quite different ways. Texts will involve a degree of planning, revising and reworking and will therefore be more highly structured. Because the writer has more time to construct the text, the sentences are generally more 'crafted', with greater complexity and density.

Because a written text needs to be able to 'stand on its own', the reader cannot get help from an interaction partner or the surrounding setting. The reader must use cues from the text itself to undertand how it is developing. And the writer needs to know how to guide the reader through the text. This involves quite sophisticated language skills (eg using the beginning focus of the sentence or clause, using text connectives, compacting information so that it does not sound 'rambling'). Moving successfully from spoken to written modes is one of the major achievements of primary schooling, requiring the development of a number of high-level skills and strategies. Children who cannot cope with the features of written text have great difficulties in later schooling.

This book deals with the language features involved in constructing coherent and cohesive texts.

The following diagram summarises how the different language functions are involved in students' learning through the primary school.



| EARLY CHILDHOOD | LATER CHILDHOOD |
| --- | --- |
| *Language for interacting with others* | |
| operating in contexts which involve more personal, informal, familiar interaction; free expression of judgement and assertiveness; and a limited range of roles | operating in contexts which include more impersonal, formal, careful expression of judgement and assertiveness; expanded range of roles; critical awareness of how language can be used to position self and others. |
| *Language for representing experience* | |
| dealing with everyday, individualised, concrete, non-specialised subject matter | dealing with more technical, generalised, abstract, discipline-specific subject matter |
| *Language for creating oral and written texts* | |
| engaging in face-to-face, spontaneous, context-dependent dialogues | distanced—in time and space—monologic, crafted and planned, independent of immediate context |

## Considerations for teaching grammar

Most children will learn how to use grammar implicitly by engaging in extensive and purposeful talking, listening, reading, writing and viewing. Children come to school with a highly-developed ability to use language in rich and complex ways. Their language will continue to develop naturally as they use it for a variety of purposes in their homes, in the community and school. In addition to this natural acquisition, this book will assume that the teacher plays a deliberate role in enhancing children's language use in certain areas and in developing their awareness of language.

### Learning to ...

In the classroom, children will be learning to use language in particular ways. The teacher's role is to design contexts and plan activities in all curriculum areas which provide opportunities for children to develop the particular language they need in order to participate effectively in school. The teacher's knowledge about language will assist in selecting resources, choosing texts, focusing on salient points, constructing language-rich activities, responding to questions, assessing students' work, and providing informed feedback. At the end of each section of the book, you will find a description of how children—with teacher guidance—might be using the particular language feature at various stages. This is not intended as a benchmark, but rather as an indication of directions in which teachers might actively promote children's language use.

## Learning about ...

In addition to fostering children's ability to *use* language in particular ways, the teacher can tap into the child's implicit knowledge about language and help make it more explicit. The teacher can provide learners with tools for reflecting on how language works. Together they build up a shared language for talking about language (a 'metalanguage') so that they can refer to the various features and structures of language. During activities such as shared and guided reading, modelled and collaborative writing, conferencing, as part of the editing process, in class discussions, and so on, the teacher is able to focus on how language is functioning. By selecting certain texts, modelling relevant features, highlighting specific points, asking particular questions, the teacher draws their attention to ways in which language is being used. In this way the teacher is able to demonstrate how grammar is contributing to the meaning of the text. At the end of each section, you will find suggestions as to the kind of knowledge about language which children might be guided throughout their primary schooling.

Grammar should generally be taught in the context of working with whole texts (eg identifying grammatical patterns which help a particular text-type achieve its purpose). The emphasis should not be on the ability simply to label a particular feature, but on its usefulness in creating, appreciating and evaluating texts. Students should be shown how grammar helps to build up the meaning of the text. When dealing with information reports, for example, you might want to demonstrate how the timeless present tense is used for generalising. This can then be contrasted with the specific actions in the past found in recounts. The texts used when teaching grammar should be authentic, not artificial and contrived simply to teach a grammatical point. They may, however, need to be simplified, when first introducing a certain feature.

There are times, however, when it might be more efficient to look at a particular, relevant aspect of grammar more intensively. For example, if a specific feature is presenting particular challenges, then additional language activities on that feature could be explored, using a number of clear examples taken from texts.

Certain groups of students will need more systematic and focused assistance with particular features of English grammar, eg students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Emphasis should be placed on the construction of clear, well-formed, and coherent sentences and texts, and not so much on the rules of usage (eg split infinitives, the use of 'shall').

Teachers need to use their own judgement as to how much information or detail the students can usefully and comfortably deal with at any particular time. The grammatical features outlined in this book should serve as a guide as to what might reasonably be learned by most children during the years of primary schooling.

The study of grammar need not be onerous or dry. There is room for playfulness and creativity, for experimentation and discovery, for enjoyment and wonder. Children have an instinctive fascination with language. It is the teacher's job to nurture this.

## Levels of grammar

When we are teaching grammar, we need to be clear about which level we are dealing with. The diagram on page 10 illustrates the levels described below and the relationships between them.

### Text

Modern grammars now recognise how grammar extends beyond the sentence and can operate at the level of the whole text. At the text level, we find grammatical patterns which are related to a particular text type (eg the use of commands in a procedure, the use of action verbs in a recount, the use of abstract nouns in an exposition, the use of dialogue in a narrative). We also find certain features which serve to link a text together: cohesive devices such as pronouns, words which show relationships within the text (eg synonyms, repeated words), words which signal how the text is structured (eg Firstly ... ; On the one hand ... ).

### Sentence

A text is made up of a number of sentences. Sentences can consist of a single clause or a number of clauses joined together. A sentence may be a statement, a question, or a command. Students need to know how to combine clauses and how to show the relationship between clauses in a sentence.

### Clause

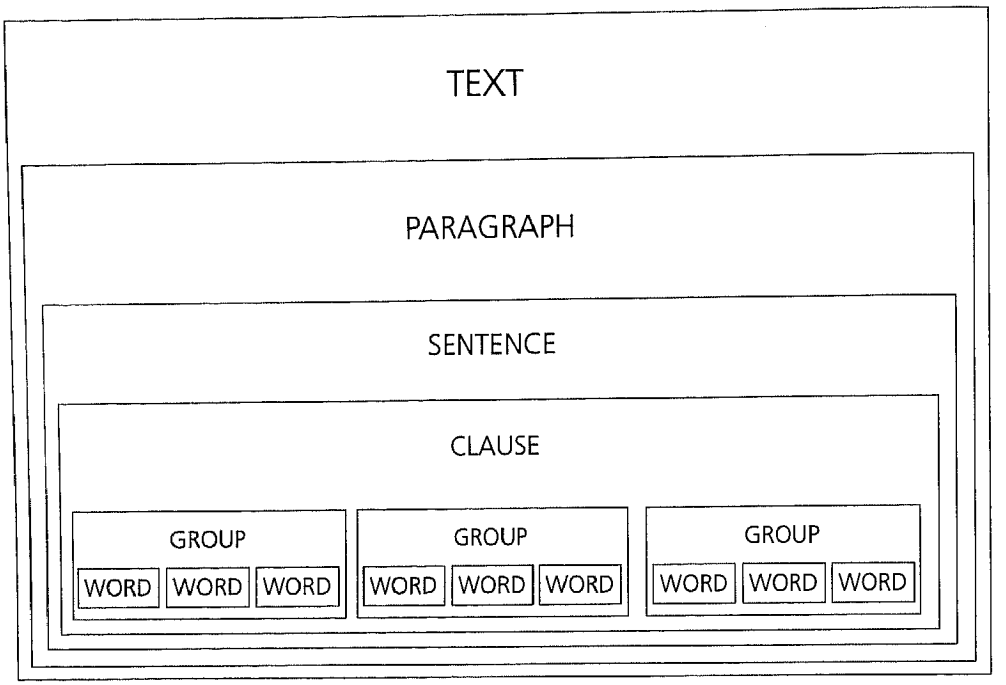
A clause is a unit of meaning which expresses a message. It must contain a verb. The clause is often seen as the basic unit for analysing language.

### Group/Phrase

A clause consists of smaller 'chunks' or groups of words which do certain jobs. At the core of the clause is the verb group (eg '**was playing**'). Involved in this action might be one or more persons or things, represented by a noun group (eg '**The frisky white kitten** was playing'). There might also be some extra information in the form of an adverbial (eg 'The frisky white kitten was playing **in the hallway**').

### Word

Groups and phrases can be divided into individual words. In a noun group, for example, we might find an article, an adjective and a noun (eg the wily fox). It is important to see how individual words function within a group so that students can see how the words relate to each other.




In the past, grammar was often taught at the level of the individual word, eg 'noun', 'verb', 'preposition'. While these categories are important, students often ended up with a fragmented knowledge of the system, with little idea of how these words work together to make meaning.

In the following four sections we will look at the larger 'chunks': those words and groups of words which make up a clause.